

Wisconsin papers are free to reprint.

(Washington, DC)— When President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama wake up in Accra, Ghana this weekend, they will send a powerful message to the world about their commitment to ensuring Africa's continued progress. Their decision to visit Ghana on the heels of the G8 summit in Italy this week — where the world's leading economies are focused on developing long-term security and prosperity — demonstrates the Obama administration's attention to also develop a healthy and prosperous Africa.

Theirs is a commitment I wholeheartedly share. But in order for Africa to make this long-forestalled progress, a renewed promise must be made to provide highly cost-effective solutions to ensure that women are healthy before, during and after pregnancy.

More than 500,000 women worldwide die from pregnancy each year, and millions more endure life-threatening complications. In Ghana, a woman has a 1 in 45 risk of death related to her pregnancy, compared with a 1 in 4,800 risk in the U.S and a 1 in 47,800 risk in Ireland. In some of the world's poorest countries, including Afghanistan, the maternal death risk is as high as 1 in 8.

Access to quality healthcare remains a burden for too many pregnant women. Only 40 percent of births worldwide take place in a health facility. Access to skilled health professionals, including midwives and birth attendants, is limited. Six of the seven countries with the highest levels of maternal mortality have less than one doctor per every 10,000 people.

This is unacceptable.

In April, I had the honor of presenting the first ladies of Mozambique and Cape Verde — Maria de Luz Guebuza and Adelcia Barreto Pires — with awards from the Global Health Council for their work to call attention to the health problems facing their countries. Their work led me to the floor of the House less than two weeks later to call on Congress to increase our effort to improve maternal health in developing countries. Last week, I secured passage of a resolution

before an international human rights panel calling for increased world cooperation to reduce maternal mortality.

Last month, I wrote a letter asking the House Appropriations Committee to include a substantial funding increase in the 2010 Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill to reduce the number of women around the globe who die each year from complications related to childbirth and pregnancy, and millions more who survive but suffer for the rest of their lives. I am encouraged that the House Appropriations Committee responded to that request by increasing funding for family planning as well as maternal and child health.

However, more remains to be done by the United States and our partners around the world if we are truly going to fulfill the promise of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, one of which is to reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters and achieve universal access to reproductive health. The United States signed on to these goals when the world's leaders met at the United Nations in September 2000.

While progress has been made on some of the other Millennium Development Goals, including fighting HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, we cannot rest on our laurels when it comes to the goal of reducing maternal mortality. We must recognize the appalling lack of progress that has been made in the area of maternal mortality, child mortality and family planning as major barriers to progress on all of the other goals.

President Obama has indicated a strong recognition that the U.S. must do more to reduce maternal mortality. In May, the president announced his plan for a six-year, \$63 billion Global Health Initiative that will bring together the various U.S. global health programs under one comprehensive and coordinated strategy.

The president has said, "We will not be successful in our efforts to end deaths from AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis unless we do more to improve health systems around the world, focus our efforts on child and maternal health, and ensure that best practices drive the funding of these programs."

I look forward to hearing from the president and first lady on this very issue following their trip to Ghana. I stand ready to work with my colleagues in Congress to make sustained progress for

the millions of women needlessly in danger of dying around the world. Pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood should not be a death sentence. Improving impoverished women's chances of survival before, during and after pregnancy is an issue of rights and social justice. It is also a sound economic and social investment, given the importance of women to the well-being of their children, families and societies.

###